

BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Lewis, Gail (2018) Of becoming and disturbance - one final offering: some thoughts on familiar stranger: a life between two islands. *Identities* 25 (1), pp. 41-48. ISSN 1070-289X.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/20632/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

'Of Becoming and Disturbance - one final offering' - some thoughts on
Familiar Stranger: a life between two islands by Stuart Hall'

Gail Lewis

Reader in Psychosocial Studies

Department of Psychosocial Studies

Birkbeck College

University of London

30 Russell Square

London WC1B 5DT

**'Of Becoming and Disturbance - one final offering' - some thoughts on
Familiar Stranger: a life between two islands by Stuart Hall**

Key Words:

Belonging, Diasporic Identity, Black Feminism, Conjuncture, Voice

I had to find a modus vivendi with the world I had entered and indeed with myself. Surprisingly, this turned out to be partly through politics. Establishing, as I had, a foothold in British radicalism and inhabiting a necessary distance from England and its values meant that I never came to be seduced by the old imperial metropole. It allowed me to maintain a space I felt I needed. (Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger*, 2017:271, my emphasis)

*To be clear, the optic that registers this girl only as “child” is one that indexes at least a certain inability to see, but what is at stake here is not a correction of that vision, not an expansion of that category of “girl” to include this child. Rather, what I am indexing here arrives by way of Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (2003b, 208), that “our task [is to make] a place for this different social subject”. (Christina Sharpe, *In The Wake: on Blackness and Being*, 2016:49, my emphasis).*

In the autumn of 2004 I was on sabbatical in Boston, Massachusetts and had the disorienting luxury of using the library at Harvard on a daily basis. At that time I was, like Stuart Hall whose office was round the corridor from mine, at the Open University, and the contrasting experience of the level of resources I was used to with the free facilities at the Harvard library was as overwhelming as it was facilitating. It seemed that the holdings, of books, journals, unpublished manuscripts, newspapers, magazines, photocopying and printing facilities (also free!) were so vast as to be without end. It was a plenitude that made you hungry and overstuffed all at once. I was constantly discovering new authors and/or new texts by authors with whom I was already familiar, and this produced an endless excitement even if in many ways indigestible. On one occasion as I was searching data-bases, unexpectedly up popped a huge document that upon closer examination turned out to be Stuart Hall’s c.v.!! And it was *huge* - seemingly mirroring, at single man size, the vastness of the holdings in the Harvard Social Sciences Collection. I became aware of the sheer output of Stuart’s writings and it was only then that I really understood how much he had written – and how much across a broad spectrum – in the areas of photography and the arts; produced policy engaged writing for multilateral (international) agencies on questions of racism; how much he had maintained a politically inflected analytic interest in contemporary Caribbean social and political questions, how much exploring the meaning

and effects of controversies about 'culture', etc., etc. It made clear to me that what I knew of his (then) ever-expanding oeuvre was (and indeed remains) minimal in comparison to its vastness.

How then to offer some thoughts - or more in keeping with my own idiom, some associations to Stuart's last offering - *Familiar Stranger: a life between two islands*? It goes without saying that making that decision turns on one's own preoccupations and right now mine are related to how, or rather with what conceptual, theoretical resources, we might analyse the current conjuncture; and how black feminists are theorising the being-ness and meaning of blackness in this moment of Atlantic enslavement's afterlife. Stuart, of course, was central to the development of a conjunctural politics and the development of a way to understand the major transformations of the British social-cultural-political formation. He guided us through and bequeathed us a deeply textured theoretical approach, rich in conceptual and analytic resources with which we (by which I mean those of us located in the European part of the Black Atlantic diaspora) might attend to the urgent question of understanding where we are now, how we got here, where we might go and how we might seize the time and embark on a battle for hegemony, tooled with a Gramscian inspired attention to the specificity of 'now'. For one of the things that *Familiar Stranger* makes clear, (if we were not already aware), is that among Stuart's hallmarks was his capacity to show us a way to address the political-social questions of the day in the context of an engaged and politically relevant intellectual project. So in so far as the conjunctural is among my preoccupations, I am among his political off-spring.

In relation to the potential travel between Stuart's bequest and black feminist theorisation of African legacy in the cultural forms of the Black Atlantic, of the meaning, possibility and limits of diaspora formation in the afterlife of Atlantic enslavement, in the desires for but impossibilities of 'return', *Familiar Stranger* is more suggestive of a link, more circumscribed than offering any loud and clear connection. And yet, precisely because what, in my reading, feels like a profound ambivalence, the question of what might prevent or foreclose such an engagement between Stuart's account of his process of multiple becomings and the overlap between some of his concerns and those offered by black feminists, becomes loud because of its absence. This turns on the link between the

imperative captured in the epigrams with which I opened this piece: the imperative of finding an intellectual, epistemological, psychic and emotional space to be and see otherwise; how to re-memory the space between the leavings and not quite-arrivals of our diasporic journeys; how to do so outside of the 'truths' of blackness laid down in the afterlife of colonialism and Atlantic enslavement (and its subsequent/related forms of unfree labour) and the living legacy of anti-blackness.

Uncanny echoes

'Familiar' – 'Stranger' – the summoning of the uncanny in this title cannot go unrecognised whether consciously intended or not. In one sense this could allude to no more than the charting in *Familiar Stranger* of the emergence of many of the preoccupations, concepts and theoretical approaches now associated with Stuart's work. His troubled and unsettling relationship to Marxism as manifest in both its Communist and Trotskyist left versions and the New Left as it emerged post-Suez and post-Hungary (1956). We read and feel his account of his engagements with varieties of post-structuralist and post-modern thought insistently inflected or read through the post-colonial; his explication of and insistence upon the need for conjunctural analysis – indeed for a conjunctural politics – in which the specificity of any given 'moment' (post-1958 white riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham, of New Times post-Thatcher) is the object of unrelenting scrutiny; of the conceptualisation, meaning and role of culture and the cultural in both the play of power and domination *and* as a key factor around which the political might be fought out and new subjectivities produced; of the conceptualisation of 'diaspora' and the implications of diasporic subjectivities formed in the crucible of syncretic practices in both Jamaica and then again in the UK; of the central importance of understanding that these diasporic subjectivities as articulated through and with a plurality of antagonisms in conditions of *differance*.

All this is familiar even while we are taken on a journey of discovery as to why Stuart's last testament is also strange – his generational Jamaican-ness, his becoming black, his story of himself as an absent presence is in the register of the uncanny – the familiar as strange, the strange as familiar. For while one of the powers of the book (and here tribute must be paid to Bill Schwarz' powers of evocation too) is that one can hear Stuart's voice, the

points at which his tone would rise, at which a slight laugh could be discerned at the back of his throat – precisely when the most important but often most occluded or disavowed issue was at stake - the point at which his tone would drop and his pace slow, the point at which you would be hailed as if it was to *you, just you* to whom he was talking, the point at which the learning point was delivered, the challenge was made, the decisive blow in the argument delivered. Yet for all this presence – there is still some elusive, not quite in reach *playfulness and sadness* (at least in my reading) that runs through the book. A playful sadness redolent of the reminiscences of a man nearing the end of his life, but which I think we cannot but link to Stuart’s revelation of his life-long strangeness – not just in what we might (in a gesture of psychic defence) understand as the condition of human subjectivity as inevitably ‘alienated’ and structured and driven by ‘desire’. For it is a felt ‘strangeness’ from which a gesture toward contact is made – a reaching out by a man, a Jamaican man, who having “*...lived in interesting times... thought it would be engaging for others to read my reflections on those experiences, ideas, events and memories from the vantage point of someone who lived them, as it were, from the margins*” (p.10, my emphasis). We learn that occupation of, and observation from, the margin was a life-long condition for him and we see too how this shifting-in-repetition condition also produced an unrelenting curiosity about Jamaica, the Caribbean, all the things (already listed) that are his hallmark, about the world and its inequities and possibilities. We might read *Familiar Stranger* as an account of the biographical, social, political, psychic generators and intellectual, conceptual, political effects of that unrelenting curiosity. Curiosity as survival for him and as gift to us in what he bequeathed us. But also curiosity as an ‘outsiderness’, ‘aloneness’ for we also see this life-long positioning as stranger, as inhabiting the margins through a series of losses and un-belongings. Losses and un-belonging as he struggled with and against his position as the son with the darkest hue from a middle-class ‘brown’ family and a mother (in particular) who was deeply and rigidly invested in colonial racial logics and hierarchies of colour and its associated profound anti-blackness. Losses and un-belonging as he was driven beside himself by the Labourist Left; the Marxist New Left and some of its key theorists who were so committed to the disavowal of racism (and its effect, race) as a *structuring* principle of British social formation. The losses and un-belonging rendered aural and felt in the tones and cadences of Miles Davis’ trumpet even while that same trumpet provided Stuart Hall, man of modernity, with meaning and indeed phenomenological substance. So we know

something of the conditions through which all these 'Stuart Halls' came into being.

We know too from his narrative that there were key moments inaugurating his multiple becomings: 1938 and the massive wave of labour strikes that engulfed Jamaica, spread throughout the West Indies, that geo-political-ideological category referencing that part of the Caribbean colonised by the British; 1951 and his arrival in England on his way to Oxford as Rhodes Scholar but when he also caught first sight of those fellow but strange (working class) West Indians who, (like my father) had arrived through other routes and other means but who were to share a future positioning in Britain; 1956 in the wake of both Hungary and Suez, when he, and some of his non-aligned fellow travellers seized the moral/political moment to form the New Left; 1964 when he married and knew for sure it was in England that he was to forge his life. This is the point at which the book ends, but if we cross read this text with its earlier 'essay' length precursor, *'The Making of a Diasporic Intellectual: an interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chan'* (1996) that among other key moments for him were the move to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University in 1964 and the move to the Open University Sociology Department in 1979.

We learn from the book that it was in his long and segmented becomings after arrival in England, that two key elements of his on-going process of becoming were a recognition that black presence and anti-colonialism, anti-racism 'at home', together with the transformations in both class and culture, made it essential to rethink politics itself.

...the very idea of articulation implies the forging of historically specific connections between phenomena which are significantly different...The fundamental relations of class, decisive as they were [in the late 1950s/early 1960s], couldn't tell us what politically we needed to know. Politics itself had to be rethought... The degree to which new cultural forms transfigured and expanded the ambit of politics itself was perhaps the dominating issue... (2017:241)

Across all these moments (and more) *Familiar Stranger* charts the ever expanding capacities of Stuart Hall as intellectual, theorist, cultural-political analyst, and we should not forget, teacher. Yet all this is accompanied by a beat, nay a continuo pulse in the minor key conjuring something more empty, lost, sad – an affective register more communicative of an un-fillable void than is captured in his oft repeated statement that arrivals are always deferred.

The echo of the missing - black feminist connections

It is here that I think we might trace a link to the work of black feminists such as Saidiya Hartman, Dionne Brand, NourbeSe Philip, Toni Morrison, though none of them enter the pages of *Familiar Stranger* in any explicit way. To explore this we might take seriously the 'leavings', the 'escapes', the 'running-aways', that are also indicated in *Familiar Stranger*, and consider what potential connections get foreclosed. And in the leavings, 'women' in many guises and positions, as external and internal objects, figure largely. In *Familiar Stranger* Stuart rehearses again his desperate need and prolonged struggle to leave his mother – a relationship that was fraught with a stifling intimacy. Indeed it was in the context of his first 'leaving' home, to go and teach in a school in rural Clarendon that he would catch a first glimpse of something to which he would later journey toward – teaching.

"This was a critical moment in my disengagement from my familial culture: the first time I had lived in a rural area, the first time I fell in love. I think this was the moment when I knew that what I really wanted to be was a teacher" (p.133)

We also hear of his need to, and guilt about, leaving his sister, who had become so filled with the toxicity of the racial logics their mother held so dear and that saturated the familial (indeed national) culture that she was emotionally destroyed. We have heard some of this before, in the interview with Kuan-Hsing Chan (1996) in which the phrase 'familiar stranger' is already coined. In this article Stuart also makes it clear not just that the Jamaica in which he was raised and formed was very different from the Jamaica of the post-1970s, when Jamaica had become black, and so positioned him as 'familiar stranger' – a condition he also occupied in relation to England, but that negotiating this disjunction of the two Jamaicas was made easier by bereavement (1996:490). What is weaved together here are issues of place of formation, place of re-formation, one version of which is *generational* place.

Throughout *Familiar Stranger* this question of generation and what his generational placement was is a consistent theme. This is not just about generation as inheritance (toxic or otherwise) but as point of divide between one approach/set of animating preoccupations and another and the political subjectivities/theoretical approaches offered/possible. 'Generation' also works to engage the larger questions with which he charged us

(the generations that followed him) and to which some of his key concepts can be deployed in the politically focused intellectual work he insisted on: what is specific about now/about this conjuncture?; how are processes of articulation working to yoke together elements that work to different logics and with what effects; how are we to read the ways in which key issues are encoded?

But this early interview essay version of *Familiar Stranger* also tells us of his leaving from feminism – feminism as lived at the CCCS at Birmingham.

Then the question of feminism was very difficult to take, for two reasons. One is that, if I had been opposed to feminism, that would have been a different thing, but I was for it. So, being targeted as 'the enemy', as senior patriarchal figure, placed me in [an] impossibly contradictory position. Of course,... they were absolutely right to do it. ... But I couldn't fight my feminist students. Another way of thinking about that contradiction is a contradiction between theory and practice. ... Living the politics is different from being abstractly in favour of it. I was checkmated by feminists; I couldn't come to terms with it, in the Centre's work. It wasn't personal... It was a structural thing. I could no longer do any useful work, from that position. It was time to go. (1996:500, my emphasis).

If we take seriously Stuart's repeated insistence in *Familiar Stranger* about the impossibility of separating psychic life and its conflicts from socio-cultural life and its conflicts and, whilst holding his mother in mind, apply this logic to this statement and read as a statement that makes sense of his minimal engagement with black feminism. One might say that *Familiar Stranger* not only tells us about what became possible, opened up by the 'interesting times' in which Stuart lived his life from the margins, but also what was always already foreclosed. In my reading, with my preoccupations and the texts with whom I put Stuart in conversation, central in this foreclosure was an engagement with areas of black feminist theorisation of themes/issues that, paradoxically, parallel his own concerns – fundamentally black subjectivity and its living in the diasporic afterlife of the Middle Passage, enslavement, colonisation and the problematic of 'return' – how to write our stories otherwise. Outsiderness, bereavement, exile, loss, forestalled 'arrival', leaving – all are the conditions of possibility of the giant intellectual that was Stuart Hall. How though to face and engage

with the work of figures whose very embodiment summoned that which must be severed and left behind to live productively? How, indeed, to do so, when that which has been severed has already occurred in the leavings from “the door of no return” (Brand, 2001; Hartman, 2007) to which there can be no return? This is the question that, for me, is also posed in an acute and aching way in the pages of *Familiar Stranger*. Not just because who could not be returned to in the family that produced Stuart, but also because in stating in his own way the themes taken up and theorised by a range of black feminists, we are left in the hollow and emptiness that follows from the telling of stories that cannot be told (Philip, 2008) and reminded, especially in these post-Trump, post-Brexit times, that the afterlife of colonialisms’ anti-blackness is alive and well, as it was in the very life blood of Stuart’s familial home in Jamaica.

So one might read the whole book as a subjunctive – that is as a text that expresses doubts, desires, might-have-been- saids, possibilities - and thus evokes a field of the affective, of emotions and emotional charge that are also ways of telling a story, constructing a narrative of a life in and of the contexts that produce it. Yet in doing so attention must be paid to its aporia. That after all, is what he insistently called upon us to do and in honouring him we might attempt to inscribe into our own intellectual practices.

References:

- Brand, Dionne (2001) *Map of the door of no return: notes to belonging*, Toronto: Doubleday
- Hartman, Saidiya (2007) *Lose Your Mother: a journey along the Atlantic slave route*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
- Kuan-Hsing Chan (1996) ‘The Making of a Diasporic Intellectual: an interview with Stuart Hall’ in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chan, eds. *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural Studies*, London; Routledge
- M. NourbeSe Philp (2008) *Zong!*, Middletown: Connecticut
- Christina Sharpe (2016) *In The Wake: on Blackness and Being*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press

Gail Lewis
Reader in Psychosocial Studies
Birkbeck College.

